

Acknowledgments

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Executive Summary

Located on the great Permian Uplift, the Guadalupe Mountains and Carlsbad Caverns national parks area is rich in prehistory and history. It is a stark landscape, one that is hard for humans. The plentiful resources of humid climates, the riverine environments that elsewhere in the semi-arid world sustain human endeavor are conspicuously limited in southeastern New Mexico and trans-Pecos Texas. From prehistory through the Mexican era, the region was sparsely inhabited and typically overlooked. A subregion defined by the transience of its human population well into the nineteenth century resulted; only with the advent of industrial systems of transportation and a national and eventually global market did this region become integrated into larger economic and social superstructures.

After the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848, Americans traversed the region and began to seek to harness it, creating conflict with the Native American peoples who had their histories in the region. A more than thirty-year period of conflict followed, pitting the U.S. Army against the Mescalero Apaches, the Confederacy against the U.S. Army, and again the Army against Native Americans. The Buffalo Soldiers, African-American cavalymen, played a role in this conflict, the culmination of which occurred in the Victorio War that ended with the death of the great Apache leader in 1880. After 1880, the reservation system largely contained Native American people in the region, opening land and resources to the desires of the expanding American nation.

After the containment of the Mescalero, the region opened to Anglo-American settlement. Prior to 1880, cattlemen ruled the area; the famed Lincoln County War, which gave rise to the story of Billy the Kid, took place on the edge of this region. By the mid-1880s, the beginning of a settled regime took hold, enhanced after 1890 with the coming of the railroad and the commencement of widespread private irrigation. The result was a regional economy that followed the dictates of the agricultural parts of the nation in a marginal semi-arid locale. The private irrigation companies failed, and after the Reclamation Act of 1902, federal dollars sustained regional irrigation, and with it, regional life. The federal presence became the most powerful regional force during the twentieth century. Irrigation and federally funded dams, national park areas, the Civilian Conservation Corps, war-time development, a second national park, and later the development of a federally supported waste storage location. The deep caves beneath the Permian Uplift held great mystique; the most famous of these, now known as Carlsbad Caverns, became first a regional then a national sensation after a local cowboy, James L. (Jim) White, began the process of turning it into a wonder for the traveling public. From White's endeavor came first a national monument, then in 1930 a national park. A generation later, the establishment of Guadalupe Mountains National Park as one of the last traditional national parks in the lower forty-eight states cemented the significance of federal activity in southeastern New Mexico and the trans-Pecos. The federal economy served as a spine, with some parts such as tourism often locally regarded as a shadow economy, underpinning private endeavor in the region.

After 1900, a series of extractive regimes paralleled federal activity. Irrigated agriculture

and ranching served as mainstays. Guano, a widely used fertilizer before 1900, was found in the same caves that White developed for tourism. From early in the century until the 1920s, guano was a major export of the region. Following the demise of the guano industry and the rise of recreation, potash mining in the immediate Carlsbad area and oil and gas development throughout the greater region drove the private sector. After the decline of potash mining in the 1960s and 1970s, the region became the province of “retirees and rest homes,” as one local observer recounted. In this the region anticipated the shift the service economy that the rest nation wrestled with a decade later.

In the 1990s, the two parks face an array of issues that are typical of popular national park areas throughout the nation. Both face the impact of visitation on their resources and grapple with the changes in the expectations of the public. Both face questions of resource management and funding, challenges to the mission of the parks, and the complications of managing national parks in an era during which the role of the government is often in question. The situation offers promise and peril, opportunities and threat, all of which stem from and reflect the histories of both parks and the subregion they inhabit.